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OBITUARY

SIR JOHN RENNIE

Former head of MI6

Sir John Ogilvy Rennie, KCMG, a distinguished public servant who was formerly Director-General of the Secret Intelligence Service, popularly known as MI6, died on September 30. He was 67.

The greater part of Rennie's official life was spent in the Diplomatic Service where in retrospect it might be considered that his widely varied talent did not find its fullest scope. Ill-luck and personal misfortune conspired to affect his career.

Born in June 1914 he was educated at Wellington College and Balliol College, Oxford. He did well at both institutions and in particular his artistic gifts found early recognition by the acceptance of his paintings in the Royal Academy and the Paris Salon. On coming down from Oxford in 1935 he went to work in New York for Kenyon & Eckhart Inc, an advertising agency.

In 1938 he was married to Anne Marie Celine Monica Godat, a Swiss national.

At the outbreak of war he was quickly drawn into the British Government Information machine then hastily being organised to combat German propaganda in the United States. He worked first in Baltimore at the British Consulate and later moved to New York to the headquarters where he remained until the end of the war. Together with John Wheeler Bennett, Leonard Miall and David Bowes Lyon, he was a part of an effective team to which his self-taught knowledge of electronics made a valuable contribution. Throughout this time he developed, and always retained, a great but not uncritical affection for the United States, fortified by a profound knowledge of its history and ways of life. It was natural that these qualifications should later shape the course of his diplomatic career.

On his return to England in 1946 he was accepted into the Foreign (later Diplomatic) Service and took up an appointment appropriately in the Information Policy Department in the Foreign Office. In 1948 he returned to the United States as First Secretary (Commercial) at the British Embassy, Washington, where his good looks and intelligence made a favourable impression and established his reputation in the Service.

In 1951 he was moved to Warsaw, again as first Secretary (Commercial) and remained there until 1953. In Poland he was able to see at first hand an Eastern European country in the tightening grip of the cold war and under direct Soviet domination. This experience and his previous knowledge of information work made him an excellent choice in 1953 for the head of the Information Research Department in the Foreign Office where he remained for the unusually long period of almost five years. This Department was a new venture and had been created under Ernest Bevin's leadership largely at the inspiration of Christopher Mayhew. Its purpose was the dissemination of information primarily abroad but also at home on developments in the Communist world. It did a great deal to open the eyes of foreign governments and influential individuals to what was happening behind the Iron curtain when accurate information and the correct interpretation of events was not readily available in the West and in newly independent post-war countries. Rennie's role in the Department was central and his achievement was notable.

After this comparatively long spell at home Rennie went in 1958 as the Commercial Minister in Buenos Aires and his success there led to a similar appointment in Washington in 1960. To his regret only pressure of time prevented him sailing his own boat from the Argentine to his new post in the north.

Not long after his arrival in Washington his good fortune deserted him. His wife became seriously ill in 1963 and instead of returning to the Foreign Office he unselfishly chose to be put *en disponibilité* in order to care for his dying wife. In 1964, however, he felt able to take up an Under-Secretary post in the Foreign Office with responsibilities for the Americas and in this capacity he went on a special mission to Central America in an effort to resolve the problems between Guatemala and British Honduras. Early in 1966 he was seconded for a few months to the Civil Service Commission

as Chairman of an interviewing board and later that year he married his second wife, Mrs Jennifer Margaret Rycroft the widow of a victim of the Thetis submarine disaster. In October 1966 he was promoted a Deputy Under-Secretary with responsibilities for Defence matters. This appointment involved the chairmanship of a number of Cabinet Committees. Rennie was much liked by the Defence Chiefs who were quick to appreciate his constructive talent and throughout this time the relationships between the Foreign Office and the Defence Department were consistently good.

In 1968 an important change came in his career. The top post in the Secret Intelligence Service became vacant. No suitable candidate was at that time available from within the Service concerned. Rennie was offered and accepted the appointment, which he can neither have expected and certainly did not seek. He did not find the transition altogether easy nor the post immediately congenial. It was a period too in which a family tragedy — the sentencing to jail terms on drugs charges of his son, Charles, and his daughter-in-law in 1973 — caused him public embarrassment and great private distress. But he did not allow this to deflect him from the management of a successful epoch in the history of the Service of which he was Chief. Although his staff found him somewhat reserved and withdrawn his qualities of heart and mind — allied to a phenomenal memory and wide knowledge of technology — could not fail to win affection and respect. Furthermore, his reputation and his character caused him to be widely trusted by the politicians and civil servants in Whitehall. He had been appointed CMG in 1956 and created KCMG in 1967.

In 1974 he retired on reaching the age of 60. He spent his retirement enjoying his lifelong hobbies of sailing, painting and electronics. He was also a member of the English Speaking Union's national committee for England and Wales and in August this year became chairman of the English Speaking Union's current affairs committee. Rennie was a rather private and basically a somewhat shy person but those who were privileged to share his friendship held him in great affection and will long remember his many skills, charm, humour and devotion to his country.

There were two sons of his second marriage.